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## Does Anyone Really Know What's Going On? Likely Not.

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June 17, 2015 | Mr. Nathan P. Freier

National security elites have fallen into a funk over the recent course of U.S. policy. At first glance, it seems the mythical Midas Touch of the United States as indispensable to solving the world's most compelling challenges is just that . . . myth. Even a cursory examination of current events betrays a veritable dog's breakfast of U.S. policy gone or going substantially wrong. Indeed, on the heels of widely perceived disappointments in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States appears persistently plagued by serial misfortune. Making matters worse, each individual letdown seems to arrive via unforced error; and, all seem to bring with them their own catalog of unanticipated costs and hazards.

Let us review the bidding. In spite of some substantial American commitment to reverse Islamic State gains in Iraq and Syria, more territory falls victim to its predations by the day. Further, the U.S.-enabled liberation of Libya from decades of dictatorship has become instead a clinic in unintended consequences. Further, Yemen, once heralded as an American counterterrorism success, has devolved into a new round of lethal civil conflict. The Gulf States, too, are suddenly vulnerable, as they find themselves hemmed in by violent disorder on three fronts and Iranian provocation on a fourth.

A more traditional state-based set of challenges appears to be emerging somewhat unchecked—or, at a minimum, undeterred—as well. In East Asia, the pivot has not slowed Chinese adventurism, as China continues to press on multiple fronts for substantial change in the

international status quo. Likewise, in Europe, the U.S. reset with Russia is now a footnote—maybe worse, a punch line, as hope for rapprochement has yielded to despair over Russia's re-emergence as a manipulative spoiler and subversive regional contender.

The list goes on, and with the U.S. election season heating up, a predictable and unsophisticated blame game threatens to all but swallow competent debate about the pathology of our most recent policy disappointments. Hyperpoliticized chatter will follow, decrying indecisive and feckless policymakers recklessly putting U.S. interests at risk. The case will be simple: the United States is currently neither faithful enough to its friends nor aggressive or assertive enough with its foes and is, as a consequence, reaping the whirlwind. The remedy, according to those holding this view, is impulsive and visceral, relying on heavier, more unqualified doses of good faith and guts to roll back our perceived losses.

I say, Not so fast! There is merit in all thoughtful criticisms of contemporary U.S. policy. For example, let us stipulate to some mishandling of U.S. foreign and security affairs over the last 15 years. However, there is also more to the story than meets the eye. In this case, failure is not, as the saying goes, an orphan, but, rather, born of innumerable conventional perspectives wedded more to what was or is preferred than what actually is or is likely to be. Indeed, the real failure of contemporary policy is more elemental, frightening, and collective in origin than a simple shortage of good faith and guts.

In reality, we (and I really mean all of us) no longer understand the system within which we are operating well enough to make rational national security decisions that have a prayer of even modest durability over time. We live in complex and uncertain times where there are frankly more “known unknowns” than we are all comfortable admitting. Further, the speed of both system-level change and threat generation are quantum leaps ahead of a national security bureaucracy that fully matured during the predictable, binary competition of the Cold War. Thus, in fairness to those in office and as a caution to those hoping to succeed them, healthy acknowledgement of our fundamental fallibility is good place to start for future national security strategy.

The rules governing international security and the context within which those rules are applied change so fast now that no one is intellectually well-postured yet to chart reasonable, effective, and sufficiently adaptable courses of action for U.S. policy going forward. The number and diversity of

consequential actors, competing priorities and interests, and sources of hazard make new-age statecraft a complex and ambiguous business to be sure; clear definitions of success or failure are illusive, and the margin of error separating the two is razor thin regardless.

There, I said it. Alarming as it may sound, no one has a lock on wisdom anymore in national security. We will, for a time, all drive blind through a thicket of modern challenges that, in reality, present serial discontinuities from our collective past. Perhaps as early as November 9, 1989—and the fall of the Berlin Wall—American officials have been on an extended course of discovery, learning a great deal about the definition, extent, and limits of 21st-century power. All too often, they rushed to the old playbook for answers when new challenges arose. It had some residual value through the 1990s. However, it was exposed as grossly unsophisticated with the September 11, 2001, attacks and their aftermath. Nonetheless, the old playbook lingers as the world changes fundamentally around us.

Until there is a new, more sophisticated appreciation of the strategic context within which the United States is operating, there will not be an effective replacement for those in the game to reference. Further, without keen sensitivity to what is actually afoot in international relations, the more impulsive remedies of the good faith and guts crowd may prove more harmful than doing nothing at all. Thus, patience just may be the new currency of risk-informed national security decisionmaking.

Those in power and those who want it need a more nuanced, holistic, and systemic understanding of why events are unfolding as they are. Getting to that understanding will require substantial courage, temperance, honesty, and endurance among the policy elite. After all, the road to real understanding is likely to be littered with new rounds of perceived failure. In military terms, it will be less a well-planned deliberate attack on the future and more a movement to contact. There will be policy objectives and a general path to achieve them. However, the number, form, and aggregate hazard of the threats and challenges that emerge along the way will not be fully appreciated (if they ever are) until fully upon us. That, in a nutshell, is the burden of 21st century decisionmaking.

I suggest all parties should hold fire with their criticism until they have thoughtfully reimagined contemporary security conditions together in a more sophisticated manner. They will not, of course. There is no media bounce in patience. However, truth be told, most of the adversity U.S. policymaking has experienced lately springs from widespread systemic volatility lying largely

beyond the proximate control of American authorities. Without adequate preparation, tomorrow's leaders will be as ill-equipped for it as their predecessors have been; and thus, today's critic will be tomorrow's scapegoat.

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